

Simon Dent

Theme: Sonship

Study 4—Sonship Experienced

So far in these studies we have explored the Old Covenant promises of a Messiah, a Royal Son who will have an everlasting rule and kingdom. We have examined the Synoptic Gospels' witness to Jesus as this promised fulfilment, and John's focus upon the Word, as God's one and only Son who makes the Father known. It is through faith in Jesus the Christ that we may become children of God. Today our journey of biblical sonship continues with the writing of Paul.

Sonship in the Letters of Paul

The Apostle Paul employs a kaleidoscope of imagery to capture the mystery of God's incomparable grace in the Son of God. He writes of justification, imagery drawn from the law courts; Sacrifice (propitiation) from the language of Israel's worship; Redemption from the slave markets and Reconciliation, a strong relational image. The image that most strongly relates to our theme of Sonship is Adoption.

To be adopted is to be brought into a family that already exists. As we saw last week, Jesus alone is in the closest relationship with the Father, through the Spirit, and has made him known (John 1:18). His revelation is not just of the Father but also of the dynamic (power) of family love that exists in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God did not make a family when he saved human beings, he added to it when he united them in his Son.

Adoption as a metaphor for our relationship with God through Christ is a term unique to the Pauline corpus, occurring five times in 3 different letters (i.e. Gal. 4:5; Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Eph. 1:5). It is perhaps the richest possible image. When John declares "as Christ is so are we in the world" (1 John 4:17), Paul has in mind the family love dynamic that is God; the power of love that raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11). It is the love of God that brings life out of death and a whole new relationship with Him. This means from the experience of death and orphanhood, Christians experience something of the freedom, the assurance, the comfort, the calling and the embrace of being "beloved sons" in the Son. The extent of our personal experience of this powerful embrace of the Father, reflects our comprehension of our union with the Son.

Adoption served an important function in the ancient Roman world. The family was the social and economic glue to Roman society. If the Father of a household (the *Paterfamilias*) had no heirs, adoption was a way of continuing his lineage and the social cohesion of Roman society. Usually adults were adopted into Roman households as heirs after they had proven their suitability. The new Son now had a new head who had the *Paterfamilias* authority and 'ownership' of the Son. When Christians began speaking of themselves with God as their *Paterfamilias*, they were often ostracised for threatening civilisation as they the Romans knew it. There was a strong sense of betrayal. For them they now had a new family, the Church with Jesus Christ as their head.

From a Child of Wrath to a Child of God through Adoption in Christ

Ephesians 2:3–6

[We] were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

The necessity of adoption into God's family is stressed by Paul in a variety of ways in his letters. Paul speaks of humanity in slavery to things which are not God (Gal. 4:8). They are held captive to the devil (2 Tim. 2:26), to their own corruption (Rom 7:10) to the reign of death (Rom 5:14) in a body of death (Rom 7:24) and to God's righteous condemnation of evil (2:7) in the law (7:23). Created to be children of God they now find themselves enslaved to an illegitimate and oppressive father. Consequently they were "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world". Paul paints the bleak picture of an orphan desperately in need of a new family (whether they know it or not!). However:

. . . now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith (Rom. 3:21–26).

Adopted into the Family of the True Father

"Now faith has come you are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 3:26).

Paul's Letter to the Galatians highlights two ways of relating to God. Like an exasperated father, Paul complains to the Galatian church who are being drawn away from the power of the gospel and now seek to relate to God through their obedience to law. This is to live as a slave and not as a Son. Like any adopted child, it takes time to know how to live in a new family. He writes in Galatians 3:23–26, 29:

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Paul stresses the contrast between belonging to the two different families. Instead of captivity, imprisonment, and enslavement to the law, we are made offspring, heirs, and recipients of the family promise through faith in Christ. The rights of a full child are now applied to us. We are taken out of our previous situation and placed in an new relationship to

our Father. Through knowing our Father in the Cross of his Son, we now begin a new life as a part of his new family. All our old relationships and obligations are cancelled, particularly the law. We now live to God in the new way of the Spirit of Sonship in Christ with a new Father. As sons and daughters in the Son we have experienced a changed status in which our old name is set aside and a new name given to us by our adoptive Father:

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:4–7).

Through the Spirit, we may now speak of ourselves, not as adopted sons but as Sons—Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free—we are all one in the Son (Gal. 3:28). God has fulfilled His own legal obligations for our adoption in the death and resurrection of his Son and has poured the Spirit of Sonship into our hearts. The same Spirit of Sonship that Jesus himself knows. As he cried "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36) in the Garden of Gethsemane, so we cry "Abba, Father" by the one and same Spirit. To be given the "Spirit of his Son" is to view the Father from the Son's perspective. Rather than fear and judgement, we see love and pleasure. It is to hear the Father's voice, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased", and have the desire to walk as a true Son of the Father led by the Spirit of Sonship.

Paul stresses this new life in Romans 8:14–15:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Our freedom to walk as children of God is now a matter of faith and perspective:

Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it (Luke 10:23).

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:2–3).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:3–6).

Paul demonstrates that we have access to the power of God as children of God in the Son: "For through him we both [Jew and Gentile] have access to the Father by one Spirit" (Eph.

2:18). He speaks of every spiritual blessing that the Triune God had before the creation of the world which is now ours in his Son. The church even now demonstrates this access in practical love and demonstration of the Spirit's power. The Book of Acts is an account of the Father's work that Jesus the Son does through the Church in His name (Acts 1:1). When Peter and John healed the lame man at the beautiful gate it was in Jesus' name. This is the ongoing life and ministry of Jesus, the Son, through the Church.

Today we have the downpayment of our sonship through the Spirit though its fullness is yet to come. We will, with the rest of creation, groan inwardly for the full revelation of our adoption to Sonship (Rom. 8:23). However even now we may Pray with Paul:

. . . that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe (Eph. 1:16–19).

So even now we have the Father's provision to see our lives, our relationships and the world around us with the eyes of a full Son of God. We might then ask, what would it mean for us to see our own lives and our purpose through the eyes of God? What would the risen Jesus see of the current situation we are facing? Our perceptions are the starting point of spiritual transformation. To mature into the sonship we may have is to change the way we see. We can't effectively change our language and behaviour unless we see the world (and ourselves) the way God does.

So we still have before us a choice of living under the authority of one of two types of Fathers (Rom. 6:16). We can enslave ourselves to the world, the flesh and the Devil, or we may live by the Spirit of Sonship in the Father's love. This choice is only made possible through the Cross and the Father's choice of us in Christ. Far from being a comforting theology, God is calling us to choose our Sonship and set our minds on the Spirit. Even today we are still tempted to live according to the flesh. This might be ongoing patterns of negativity or despondency over life's circumstances. However, our union with Jesus' Sonship is more real than our circumstance. Jesus says, "Let those who have ears hear", and in John 10 he says, "my sheep hear my voice". Hearing the voice of God and choosing to live and see as Jesus does is a living dynamic made possible by the Gospel.